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Techno Poetics: Reading Cyberpunk Poems

The paper is an attempt to make sense of the topos in which cyberpunk poetry exists. It is an attempt to unearth the major characteristics, themes and images of cyberpunk poetry especially with reference to its major practitioner Edwin Morgan. Cyberpunk poetry is a paradox as the concept of poetry as is commonly understood is subjected to severe reversal in the cyberpunk realm. Cyberpunk emerges from the interface between man and machine in a realm in which the human is subjected to machinations. Many changes have been wrought in the poetic scenario by the concretization of images and introduction of the rationale of science into the fluidity of poetry in this postmodern age. Edwin Morgan is a Scottish poet whose poetry reveals the influence of science and technology in altering the creative spark rendering technical and concrete while requiring to maintain the fluidity of poetry.

Cyberpunk originates when typical science fictions are modified to accommodate the multiple landscapes of the postmodern technology that thrives in offering futuristic worlds inhabited by futuristic beings combining the intelligence of humans with the tools of technology. The term as such was coined by Bruce Bethke as the title of a short story which he published in the Amazing Science Fiction Stories magazine in 1983. But later on the term came to be applied to advanced science fiction written by writers like William Gibson, Pat Cadigan etc. Gibson's The Necromancer became one of the early examples of full-fledged cyberpunk fiction. The way Information Technology has been inducted into human life and

how human being functions as another IT system is what distinguishes Cyberpunk. As a genre it has been conspicuously influenced by other genres claiming a postmodern space like detective fiction, space fiction, punk rock and gothic. The world of dark realities and hard computer connected facets of digital existence have together woven the image of a bleak techie self to the cyber punk world where technological wizards convert their brain into another IT device trying to envisage worlds that far outsmart god's own handiworks. The representation of a world though far less human and emotional is not entirely one of horrid digitalism. Instead it opens before us the unimaginable possibilities of a marvelous world making time travel, digital texting, mind mapping, chip existence , and controlling masses not with fiery speeches but with embedded encoding possible that liberate human imagination and its possibilities into hitherto unraveled world that reside in the numberless neurons of human brain or in some distant planetary space.

Cyberpunk literary creations are generally woven around highly digitalized urban settings, where mega corporations and the techies with micro-chipped computer brains control the life and where the world is ruled by computer key boards functioning like human beings. The urban settings are dark and eerie in which the high life with its neon artificial settings vie with the grey zones of low life. Characteristically both edges are without human passion and emotion. It is dominated by the cold calculativeness of hard drives in all its deviant significance. As William Gibson puts in The Necromancer,

Cyber Space : A consensual hallucination experienced daily by

billions of legitimate operators in every nation, by children being

taught mathematical concepts ... A graphic representation of data

abstracted from the bank of every computer in the human system.

Unthinkable complexity lines of light ranged in the non-space of the

mind. Clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights receding

(Gibson 9).

It is incomprehensible to sometimes to connect poetry to the idea of the cyberpunk which deals with the hard facts of future dystopias where beings bearing modem brains and chipped circuits operate on digitalized communities. In cyber punk poems one comes across the vast spatiality and unending temporality offering dreams of eternal expanse of existence where the aliens act as your neighbours and Martians your friends. It forever fuels the quest for enquiry and the thirst of alternate world with its possibilities of   slip in time and future space. It triggers endless dimensions which question the restricted time and constricted space of the world order. The expansive immensity of space and time is vigorously experienced in the cyber punk poems.

 The enquiry into cyber poems is what connects one to Edwin Morgan. In Morgan's poems the constant enquiry into the experimental world of science is apprehended as equivalent to the ever flowing heights of creativity as seen in poetry.

In his poem "A Home in Space" Morgan speaks about how people

gave their capsule such power that -

that they launched themselves outwards -

outwards in an impeccable trajectory, that band -

that band of tranquil defiers, not to plant any -

any home with roots but to keep a -

a voyaging generation voyaging, and as far -

as far as there would ever be a home in space -

space that needs time and time that needs life (Morgan 106).

It is the space capsules sent to the space carrying along the image of a voyaging generation in search of space, vast and limitless unleashing imagination rocketing into unknown spaces.

It is observed that Cyberpunk poems generally use concrete imagery and creates a world with images of virtual reality and technological terms. Even the poets bear digital mechanized pen names. It talks about the orbits of space shuttles and the inexplicable explosion of supernovas drenching the earthly life in neon realm of artificial, fantastic light. "Madbyte sends: Tune up your circuits, check out your chips,/ Because you are going to live along life" says a cyber punk poem and challenges the notion of literary creativity ensuring immortality. It is the proper wiring with the encoded chips that would ensure longevity and immortality and not the life blood of the master spirit. Hard Metallic words do create images of unbroken substances and in a cyberpunk world it forms the stuff that dreams are made of. "Soaring metal is flight and nest together" (Morgan 106), Morgan says of flight and nest in an uncharacteristic interrogation of the soft and the gentle.

The cyberpunk poems provide the reader a tryst with the adventurous and the heroic. Most of them deal with the exploration into the space, the fantastic idea of leaving the earth with the death of the sun, the possibility of time travel, the imagined wonders of the moon and the star wars. This takes poetry away from the blissfully rural blithe innocence to a world peopled by aliens, clones and cyborgs.

The verse format provides the poet with a freer range and dull, detailed descriptions can be done away with the fluid unfathomableness that poetry alone can provide. It   is a technique that can incorporate interrogative representational strategies like impressionism and surrealism. Cyberpunk is in one way the willing

suspension of disbelief and magical construction of future worlds where digital beings thrive subjecting human potentials to interrogation.

Another notable feature found in such poems is a mechanized urban world:

Watching the sunset on the end of the highway—driving away to

the ocean of blue green-

city meditation in curving reflections of NEON signs on the

chrome of the cars…

Billboards and choco-ads above are the unfocussed bottle of time (

madbyte sends)

The images are obviously connected with the surreal city world where hyper real bill boards radiate fantastic perfect life pictures in moments of neon gleam. Cryo chambers, cities controlled by corporate conglomerate offering the delicacy of in vitro steak, with images opaque life in a land of post- biology are all seen in the city that is real and fake. The images invoke hi-tech cities with high rise buildings beyond the neon lights the sky is bleak grey.

The fluidity of poetry is communicated by stone hard images as concrete and as the computer keys and as diverse as the chromosomes. Life in a cyber poem is connected to the cables and secured with wires but communicating the wireless way.

Cyberpunk poetry is futuristic and envisages life in oxygenated cocoon capsules where DNAs vie with one another to get into the thrilling cycle of life .It is not an inhuman future , but trans human in nature where there are no labels to divide. It is a world of cosmic oneness existing beyond space and time.

Cyberpunk poems are experimental in nature with regard to techniques and innovations thrive on this realm. Onomatopic words compete with assonance

while toggled cases dismantle alignments. The possibilities that digital

technology offer are explored and various devices like new coinages, cascading

lines, fading sentences are all made use of elaborately. It is virtual as well as

visual.

References

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Morgan, Edwin. "A Home in Space". Collected Poems. Manchester: Carcanet, I990

"Madbyte Sends". The Cyberpunk Project. project.cyberpunk.ru/idb/cp_art_poetry.html.